

### NANUSH [GRAMMA], THE STORYTELLER

By Nita Deda

I've witnessed a glimpse of Nanush's life. The rest is contained in stories told by her. And Nanush was the greatest storyteller I have ever known. She would sit on her couch, stoic and soulful, and take us on a trip around the world, across human character and through time. We would take a walk in her home city Tirana to meet her brothers and sisters, and in her favorite city Florence to see the exhibition of her favorite artist Michelangelo.

As most children who grew up in the '90s in Pristina, my brothers, my cousins and I shared the typical Kosovo life of the time: a life with stark contrasts among everyday realities. We were the children of parents expelled from work by the Milošević government. Our daily routine was ripe with news-listening sessions, during which we were supposed to be super quiet, followed by animated discussions the grown-ups had about politics.

Only now can I truly understand just how precious Nanush's storytelling was. Through her stories and fairy tales we found an escape to an enchanted place where everything was possible and life was anything but boring. She'd make sure to leave just enough space for our imagination to discover new things every time she took us there. Through every story she challenged the folklore or the gender norms that surrounded us, to give way to free will. Her wisdom was love, and love never took the form of a border. Through storytelling, she taught us about family, dedication, patriotism and love.

One of her stories was that she refused to shake hands with Queen Elena of Italy in 1938 as a gesture of protest against Fascist Italy's occupation of Albania. "*Io sono Albanese* [I am Albanian]," Nanush said, when refusing to shake hands during the Queen's visit to her College, to the horror of the academic staff. Dignity was the message of this story, regardless of the authority in front of you.

My grandmother Ballkize Bakiu was born in Tirana in 1920. Her grandfather Hasan Bakiu had opened one of the first Albanian bookstores. Selling Albanian books was illegal in Ottoman times, and the ruling Young Turks twice burned the bookstore and imprisoned Hasan. Ballkize's father Zyber Bakiu is the most authoritative translator and bibliographer up to date of Sami Frashëri's work. Ballkize went to the Madre Regina College in Florence in the 1930s. After she married the ophthalmologist Xheladin Deda, who had studied in Rome, she moved to Kosovo in 1948, taking the last airplane from Tirana, after which Albania succumbed to a deep and painful isolation. She had two daughters and a son and lived in Pristina her whole life. Her family, one of the wealthiest in Tirana and anti-communist, suffered under the communist regime of Enver Hoxha. Ballkize lived her share of pain, not seeing her family for 27 years. But she remained stoic, dignified and cheerful.

When I went away to study, my friends would come to hang out with Nanush. They loved her because she made them feel understood and accepted. She loved them because being around youth enabled her to discover newness, with the wonderment of a child discovering the world for the first time. Ageless as she was, she would understand the changes that came with time without judgment, but with celebration.

“Life is like the weather, sometimes rainy, sometimes sunny, you have to learn to know that clouds and rain will pass and that sun will shine,” she used to say.

I will never forget a precious moment in her deathbed, when she asked me, “Why are you sad? Get me a glass of beer and put on some tango music!” As we danced until the end of the world, I felt proud to carry a piece of her timeless grace under my skin.